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Senator Hits 'Contra' Aid *Prospects Seen Further Dimmed*

By Joanne Omang
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The likely new chairman of the Senate intelligence committee fired a crisp early-warning shot at the White House yesterday, saying he will oppose renewal of covert U.S. aid to the "contras," rebels fighting the leftist government of Nicaragua.

Such resistance from Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.) would further dim the already uncertain prospects of the program, which the administration wants to continue but which the Democratic House has rejected three times. Congress has not voted funds for the program since last May.

Durenberger said that judicious use of covert activity is necessary to national security but that Nicaragua is a political problem that cannot be solved through covert activity.

Durenberger's remarks are one of several indications that the new

Congress may bring fundamental changes in congressional regulation of the CIA, the National Security Agency and the rest of the U.S. intelligence network.

Durenberger is to replace Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), who generally supported the administration position on intelligence matters despite occasional tough potshots such as his opposition to mining Nicaraguan harbors. Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), an administration critic, is to replace Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) as ranking minority member.

Reagan generally is losing backers and garnering opponents in oth-

er Hill changes affecting foreign operations. Rep. Jack Edwards (R-Ala.), ranking member of the Appropriations defense subcommittee, is retiring. Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), long a Reagan critic, is to become chairman of the House intelligence committee, and Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wis.), a vocal critic, is to head the Appropriations foreign operations subcommittee.

A special Senate committee on reorganization yesterday recommended that the House and Senate intelligence committees be combined into one joint committee.

It also recommended that the eight-year limit for senators' terms on the intelligence committee be extended to 10 years, a shift that

would allow nine members scheduled to leave to remain. Among those is Sen. John H. Chafee (R-R.I.), who then would become chairman instead of Durenberger.

But Durenberger said he opposes both changes and indicated he will have the support of incoming Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) when the issues come up in January. "I have talked to Dole. He does respect my judgment," Durenberger said. "The likelihood of [Republicans] trying to reform ourselves is dim to zip."

In an interview, Durenberger said the Nicaraguan covert aid program has "really damaged the oversight process" by forcing the intelligence committees of Congress to become involved in a political issue instead of regulating the process of intelligence-gathering.

Under his leadership, he said, the committee will "choose to play absolutely no role in this [Nicaraguan covert aid], turn it over to the political system and say this is a po-

litical issue.... Let's chuck this thing overboard and get back to what we're supposed to be doing," Durenberger said.

"If the administration says they don't have any other way to deal

with this problem, we're going to say, 'Well, you're not going to do it this way... don't use the intelligence process.'"

The covert military aid, which has totaled at least \$73.5 million since the program began in late 1981, according to the Central American Historical Institute, was first justified as necessary to halt Nicaraguan aid to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. When Congress balked at that reason, the administration shifted and said the program was needed to pressure the leftist Sandinista government to take part in regional peace talks.

But critics have insisted that the administration's secret goal is the same as the rebel groups it backs, to overthrow the Sandinistas. Under U.S. law, it is illegal to conduct

military operations against a government with which the United States maintains relations.

"If that's the problem, then do something about recognizing the government, or change the law to allow attacks on a government you support," Durenberger said. "But don't use the intelligence process. The judicious use of covert action is too important to our national security."

Durenberger initially opposed the program but voted for it last year.

"My instincts said from the beginning this was the wrong thing to do," Durenberger said, "but I became convinced we needed a counterpoint to the Sandinistas.... We didn't have any other vehicle and I was stuck."

Durenberger reiterated his support for "any effort to undo the Marxist stranglehold [on Nicaragua], but within limits, and those limits are protecting the use of covert action as a national security tool."